Trying to "Do the Work": Teacher Transparency and Journeying Toward Antiracist Education

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Abstract: Professors of adult education often encourage learners to engage in antiracist practice yet fail to make clear that this is easier said than done. *Teacher transparency* is one way to model adult educators' responsibility to be reflective, problematize practice, and deepen conversation and analysis during antiracist adult education classroom activities. In the paper, we explore the definition of antiracist education, describe the theoretical foundations for and define our vision of teacher transparency, and provide examples and steps for enacting this practice.

Keywords: antiracist education, teacher transparency, adult education

Learning to be an antiracist adult educator is an ongoing journey. Adult educators need models, experiential activities, and tips and techniques to develop their practice. *Teacher transparency* is one approach that may support a deepening of antiracist conversations and analysis in the classroom. Teacher transparency as a concept draws from Brookfield's (2014) idea of narrative modeling in antiracist pedagogy, with some modifications drawn from other works dedicated to antiracist teaching (Kaplowitz et al., 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006) and intercultural models for storytelling/story listening (Deardorff, 2019). In this paper, we explore the definition of antiracist education and outline the theoretical framing of the teacher transparency concept. We also provide two examples of teacher transparency and conclude with a reflection on this approach and its implications for practice.

Antiracist Education

While endeavoring to be an antiracist educator, defining the term is crucial. However, no universally accepted definition exists; some definitions have very different emphases. For example, Brown University's Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning's statement (n.d.), "*Effective Teaching is Anti-Racist Teaching*," focuses on effective classroom teaching processes to create a racially equitable environment. In contrast, Yale's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning's (n.d.) statement, "*Considerations for Antiracist Teaching*," emphasizes the importance of teachers identifying their internal biases as well as external processes, such as improving classroom procedures and environments and identifying and countering bias within the discipline at large. Our focus for teacher transparency is on antiracist classroom processes. Therefore, we draw on Brown University's Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning's definition, which suggests antiracist teaching is "intentional syllabus design, class content, or pedagogy that creates or develops racial equity, with applications for face-to-face and remote/hybrid teaching environments*"* (para. 3), to frame our concept of teacher transparency.

Teacher Transparency

As stated above, the teacher transparency concept builds on Brookfield's (2014) idea of narrative modeling. We were initially intrigued by this idea, which Brookfield developed to expand traditional antiracist pedagogy, which he defined as "helping learners identify and counter racist ideas and actions they detect in themselves and others*"* (p. 89). He proposes instructors share their experiences with enactments of white supremacy, racism, and racism disruptions. As Brookfield put it, "Instead of trying to purge themselves of these, conceal them, or damp them down, an alternative educational approach is to make these racist inclinations public and engage learners in a consideration of how to recognize and challenge these" (p. 90).

While we appreciated Brookfield's emphasis on going beyond simply sharing tips and techniques that can support antiracist pedagogy, we felt the need to modify his approach to narrative modeling. Importantly, it seems likely that adult educators and learners of color might not be included equally in this type of conversation. We desired to avoid promoting discussions that become a sort of White person's confessional, in which White adult educators unearth and share their racism while people of color are on the periphery or — worse — exposed to racist messaging and tasked with analyzing White people's racism for them.

Nonetheless, we find value in modeling vulnerability and honesty in this work. Therefore, we incorporate ideas from sources intended to promote dialogue in multicultural settings, including Deardorff's (2019) model of intercultural story circles, Kaplowitz et al.'s (2019) guide to facilitating conversations about race in educational spaces, and Singleton and Linton's (2006) guide to "courageous conversations" about race (p.1). From these sources, we include (1) emphasis on the importance of listening with curiosity to others' experiences, rather than critically reflecting only on one's own life (Deardorff) and (2) clarity about the need to expect and honor various racialized experiences rather than assuming everyone's experiences are similar to those of the privileged White group (Kaplowitz et al., 2019).

Furthermore, in conceptualizing guidelines for the practice of teacher transparency, we draw specifically upon Singleton and Linton's (2006) four agreements of courageous conversations about race (p. 58):
- Stay Engaged.
- Experience Discomfort
- Speak your Truth
- Expect and Accept Non-Closure.

Author 1 used these guidelines in past classes and found some more palatable to participants than others. Some students had difficulty with expecting and accepting non-closure — of remaining in disagreement. However, this approach is aligned closely with the focus on listening to others' experiences for understanding, being willing to share your own story honestly, and being open to discomfort as a learning opportunity. Teachers who model this form of transparency can open discussion to honest participation from a range of participants.

Thus, we envision teacher transparency as moments when educators model sharing challenges, fears, or uncertainties experienced in their quest to enact antiracist education. In this way,

teachers can make clear that no simple or pat ways exist to become an antiracist educator; and learning and development (and discomfort) are ongoing. We believe such modeling can make space for learners to express their questions, uncertainties, and challenges and open spaces more openly for meaningful and productive learning opportunities regarding antiracist pedagogy. Through storytelling, we next offer examples of our teacher transparency as models of our ongoing learning.

Author 1: Asynchronous Antiracism?

I am a middle-aged, White, cisgender woman assistant professor in an adult education master's program at a large Midwestern university. I teach two classes per semester, each usually with about 20 students. All our interactions are online and asynchronous. If you've ever taught an online class like this, you know that discussion can generate pages and pages and pages of comments, which can be extremely time-consuming to read closely and in a timely manner. Some days seem to be filled with nothing but reading online comments. In reality, I can't always read them all closely, and sometimes I can only get to them well after they have been posted.

However, it has come to my attention that on two occasions, two Black women students in two different classes have had negative experiences in these conversations. One of these students never mentioned it to me directly, but in encountering their comments after the discussion was closed, it seemed clear they had been upset. I was worried about their negative experience, but I was uncertain about the degree to which I should intervene, especially since the discussion had taken place a couple of weeks before, and the class had since moved on to another topic. In the other case, a Black student confided that she had found some of the comments from another class member upsetting and borderline offensive. Again, this disclosure took place well after the discussion had taken place. And again, I was uncertain about what actions to take. Would intervening at that point be more disruptive? If I were to intervene, where would I start?

In both cases, I wasn't sure what to do. I had the sense that reaching out directly to the students involved was important, but I was also concerned about how I construct asynchronous discussion spaces. I am interested in spaces where frank exchange is possible, AND students from marginalized groups do not get re-marginalized as part of participation. But how to do this in these asynchronous spaces, where conversation flows without a moderator? If I accept that it is not possible for me to monitor comments in the online discussion space as they happen, what parameters can I, should I, put into place to make these conversations more productive?

How do I balance discussion as an opportunity for transformational learning for participants who may have been less exposed to critical thinking about racism and White supremacy with maintaining a positive learning environment for racially marginalized students?

Author 2: To address or not to address and if so, how?

I am a late middle-aged, white, cisgender woman professor. In an asynchronous online Master's level course on adult learning during a week when the topic was "culture, context, and diversity in adult learning," students were assigned, as part of a weekly activity, to complete a personal identity pie chart (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). They were then to use this as a way to help them identify a time when culture and cultural identity had driven their behavior and influenced an interaction in an adult education setting. They were required to respond to at least one classmate with the goal of helping them see the situation from another perspective so that when confronted by a similar situation, their behaviors could be better informed by cultural awareness and critical analysis.

When one student identified a key aspect of their identity as white, another student (who identified as equal parts "American female, daughter/sister, patriot, Catholic, learner") questioned why anyone would pick whiteness as a defining aspect of identity. The questioning student stated that she found this "interesting," but that she would never include anything about skin color in a description of herself and ethnicity (which she omitted) would be far down her list. Her tone was somewhat ambiguous; it could have been interpreted as genuinely curious or downright derisive. Although at least one other student expressed concern that the questioning student's words could be potentially upsetting to others, I decided to let this sit.

Later that week, when I defined antiracism in a pre-recorded lecture, the same student reported that she stopped the lecture at that moment because "I don't pay tuition to adhere to 'woke' agendas and far left ideologies. My job as a member in society and educator is to treat all with courtesy and professionalism." She did not respond when I wrote in the comment box, "T, stopping listening to the lecture closes yourself off from the possibility of learning something new…What exactly bothers you so much about discussing a term or a concept that you don't agree with or think is important? By the way, I'm not asking you to subscribe to anything by listening to the lecture. You don't have to agree with me, absolutely not."

Several weeks later, when our weekly topic was "Critical perspectives in adult learning" and I knew that the topic of white privilege was going to be raised, I worried that her discussion responses might be problematic to many in the class and wrestled with how to balance her right to her own perspective and opinions with wanting to make the discussion open and comfortable for everyone participating. I felt strongly that I needed to meet with her ahead of the class activity going live, but I was worried that almost anything I said would lead to her saying I was telling her how she should think and feel and could easily be counterproductive.

Next Steps in the Journey

Teacher transparency means adult educators sharing our own stories and making our questions and concerns explicit. We suggest the following sample debriefing questions to spur discussion, learning, and further sharing in learning contexts where adult educators exercise teacher transparency:

- How does teacher transparency/storytelling sit with you?
- What stands out for you about the story? What curiosities do you have about it?
- What would you do and why?
- What would this be like in your context with your learners?
- What stories from your own practice does this evoke?
- In what ways can we support each other to be better teachers by sharing our stories?
- How might hearing this story help you better "do the work" of antiracist teaching?

Conclusion

When adult educators share stories about their challenges with antiracist teaching, they open spaces for learners to problem-solve and try a range of responses to complex instructional dynamics related to antiracist practices. By going first in exposing uncertainty and ambiguity, educators model that antiracist teaching is complicated and no one — not even the person teaching about the topic — has all the right answers or always knows what to do. Teacher transparency clarifies that the ongoing process of learning to be an antiracist educator can be strengthened by sharing stories and engaging in collaborative sense-making about challenges. Importantly, teacher transparency invites learners to share *their* stories; these discussions can give voice to more perspectives, creating greater potential for deeper understandings and possible solutions.

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